

"There are not only the spirits, ghosts and demons themselves, but there are also their servants in human shape, there are sorceresses and there are witches, and these last can, and do, change themselves into tapeworms, gnawing at your guts until you die, so the moment that you must know that you have a witch-tapeworm inside you, you must send for the wise man, who will pinch and prick you until the bewitched tapeworm crawls out in fear. There are also what are known as hereditary or innocent witches, poor women who have not acquired but have only inherited their dread arts; such innocents can be cured, it seems, and are more to be pitied than reviled.

But there was no quarter shown to wizards. If a man was marked as a wizard he must emigrate or be slain. And we may take it that in a rather 'primitive' and static and isolated community, a 'wizard' was often no more than a queer fellow who thought for himself and did not like the way of life of the majority, had different tastes in meat and drink, did not care for sports, dances and festivals, possibly was sexually aberrant, in fact the sort of scoundrel who must be suppressed if society is to be kept decent and reasonably conservative. In some communities such deviant members are more lucky and are straightway hailed as shamans or medicine-men. But the Laotians just did not like wizards at all. Before the French got to interfering with good old customs, there was an ordeal for wizards and their accusers. Two pots of boiling coconut oil were set up. Into one pot went the sorcerer and into the other his denouncer. Whoever got out of his pot first was cracked over the head and disposed of.

25: Brodrick--98 S-3
116, 626, 683, 754

(1939) 1948

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So, underneath all the easy-going, good nature of the Laotians lie, when the conventions are outraged, some definite reactions of a rather violent kind. One wonders what has happened to these reactions now that they cannot be released in a right and proper and traditional way. For, if we can say that the Laotians have little or no religion, in the sense of a way of life or a moral discipline, they are filled and informed with beliefs."

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791 "The Laotians also believe that there are people who are possessed by the demon or who have [151] the evil eye. They call them 'Phi-pop.' When a person or family in a village is so regarded by the other inhabitants, they are forced to move and to go and live in one of the villages composed exclusively of Phi-pop" (1).

(1) *Le Laos français*, op. cit. [Lieutenant-colonel Tournier (Superior Resident in Laos), "Notice sur le Laos français," in *Revue Indochinoise*, Hanoi, 1900.]

The boatmen and folk who dwell along the watercourses also believe in the existence of certain particular beings, as for example the Siren or "Nguoc." The siren, whom some people claim to have seen (?), is said to have the form of a snake with paws and an enormous head surmounted by a red, saw-toothed crest. It is supposed to have seven nostrils in a single nose, and a mouth provided with several rows of teeth. The scales which cover it and the lobes of its tail are said to be able to clash against one another and make a great deal of noise.

791 In times of public calamity, the "Tho-Nguoc" assumes a human voice and announces important events or cataclysms to come.

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683 The "Phi-pop," to whom we have referred above, have, according to popular belief, the power of casting spells and causing the death of animals and even persons by means of their incantations, their practices or their glance. The natives say that they can reduce a buffalo hide to the size of a grain of rice and thus make a person swallow it. Once in the stomach the hide is supposed to regain its natural volume and cause the death of the person who has swallowed it by making the stomach burst after intolerable suffering. It goes without saying that the "Phi-pop" who is the cause of the evil can, in return for certain gifts, arrest the suffering and deliver the patient before death overtakes him. A person who believes he has swallowed a buffalo hide falls prey to a kind of madness and commits all sorts of extravagances, to such a point that his neighbors try to get him out of the village and get rid of him, for he has become a "Phi-pop" in his turn. People claim that there is only one way to find out if a man is possessed, and that is to throw him into the water with his feet and hands tied. If he floats he is not possessed, but if [152] the opposite proves to be the case--and this is what invariably happens--then a "Phi-pop" is really present and his disappearance is regarded as a blessing.

173: Deydier--20 H, B-3 (no date) 1952 AM1 Indochina
(ca. 1940) Laotians AM8

But that is another story...

The belief in the phi and an excessive credulity results in Laotians being often the victims of charlatans who are severely punished by the Laotian code. Luck-bringing amulets are also very widespread. But this belief in the inhabitants of the invisible world is most apparent in childbirth and in profane ceremonies.

RELIGIOUS CEREMONIES AND FESTIVALS

The Calendar

The Laotian calendar belongs to the lunar-solar system. Its elements are borrowed principally from the Indian calendar. As in all the other countries of Indochina the Laotians use the cycle of the 12 animals (Rat, Ox, Tiger, Hare, Dragon, Serpent, Horse, Goat, Monkey, Cock, Dog, Pig).

The era most commonly used in Laos is that of Cullasakaraj (little era) beginning in A. D. 638, the next most used is the Buddhasakaraj (Buddhist era beginning in 544 B. C.). Finally the Mahasakaraj (great era) is found in ancient inscriptions. At the present time only the Christian era is used officially.

The months.

The Laotian months are alternately of 20 and 30 days. Sometimes their Indian name is used, but most often their number is used. Their names are as follows:

No.	Laotian	Pali	
1.	deuan Tieng	Magasira	December-January
2.	- Gni	Phussa	January-February
3.	- Sam	Magha	February-March
4.	- Si	Phagguna	March-April
5.	- Ha	Citta	April-May
6.	- Hoc	Visakha	May-June
7.	- Chet	Jettha	June-July
8.	- Pet	Asadha	July-August
9.	- Kao	Savana	August-September
10.	- Sip	Porthapada	September-October
11.	- Sip Et	Assayuja	October-November
12.	- Sip Song	Kattika	November-December